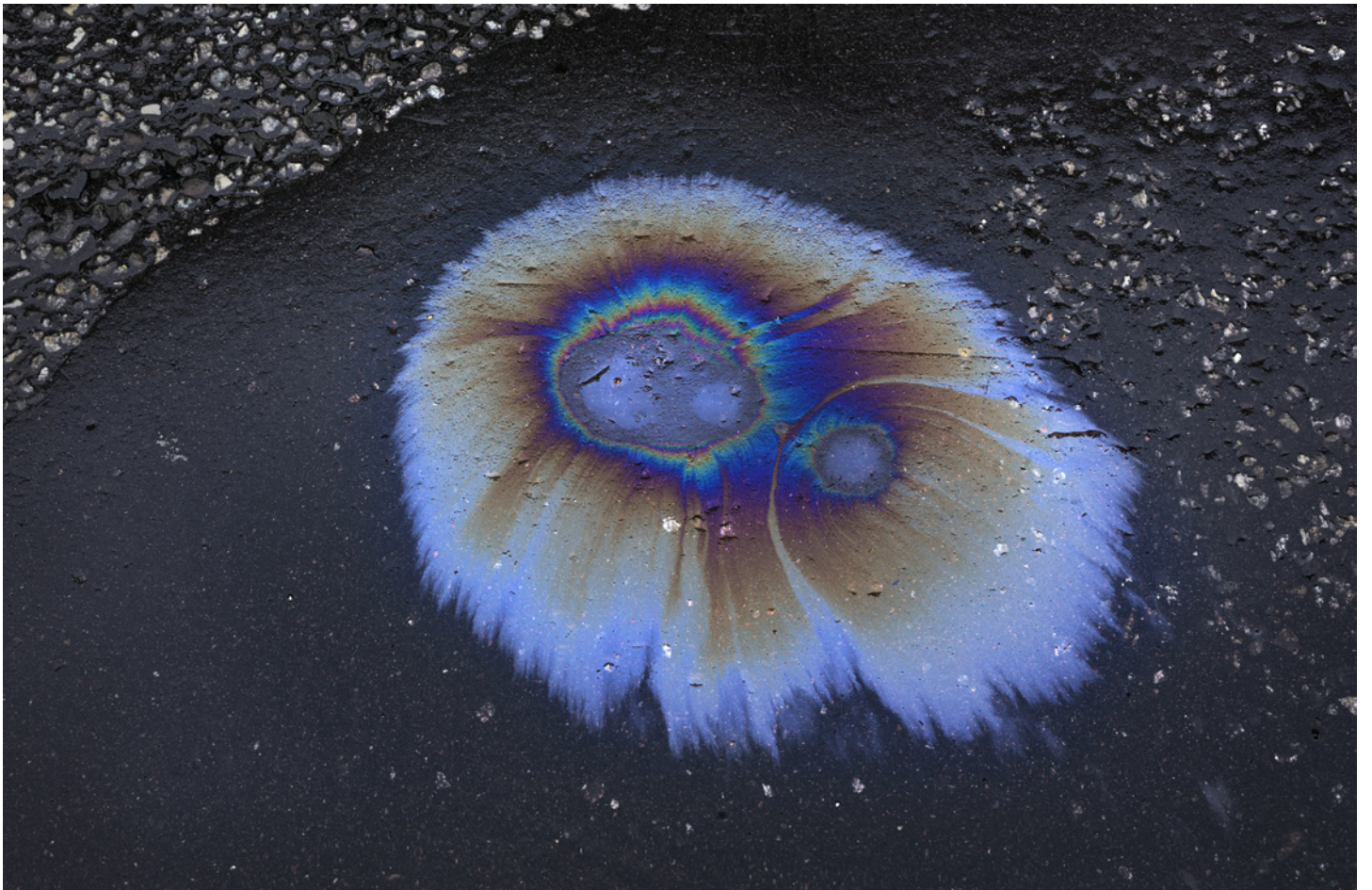




# THE END IS NIGH

*Alan Dunn on Mats Bigert and Lars Bergström's The Last Calendar*



In a May 2012 episode of the British hospital drama *Holby City* entitled *Last day on earth*, nurse Chantelle Lane is confronted by unbalanced patient Mr. Wellington who has a notebook full of scribbles from the Mayan Calendar, convinced that the world is about to end at midnight. "According to my calculations, the Mayan Calendar does not run out on December 21<sup>st</sup> 2012 as everybody endlessly blogs about," he nervously tells her, "it runs out tonight. It's the end. The end of everything."

We are given the impression that he is a retired teacher, perhaps post-breakdown. As midnight approaches he crawls under his sheets to await his fate. The tone is slightly mocking, portraying him as the oddball doom merchant, unshaven and recently split from his partner. As the clock ticks to one minute past midnight, Chantelle looks over at him and smiles, "Mr. Wellington, it's a new day, we're still here". He holds his head in his hands before glancing up at her, muttering, "I don't understand. Is this delusion?"

Notions of the end of time softly creep into British consciousness in this innocuous evening drama, yet the second narrative running through the episode is the successful rush to save a life with a heart transplant. A more complex dialogue is thus set up between faith in everyday science and a belief in human divination.

In 2011 artistic duo Mats Bigert and Lars Bergström created *The Last Calendar* to "examine the temporal nature of truth within celebrated ideas, scientific or otherwise, that history has proven to be wrong. The end-of-the-world Mayan long calendar scenario was floating around in these discussions, and we were interested to see whether there were other earlier and precisely dated opinions about the apocalypse."

AD: Could you outline what *The Last Calendar* is and how it came to exist?

MB: *The Last Calendar* is an art project that we did in collaboration with Cabinet Books in Brooklyn, New York. It is a wall calendar for this year 2012 up to 21<sup>st</sup> December when the new age reading of the Mayan long calendar claims that the world as we know it will end. In the months leading up to this disruptive event we present an odyssey of other Armageddon scenarios in which

people have imagined precise dates for the end of time.

There are generally between six and twelve entries per month, spread out through history and culture. They form an interesting thread of accounts of human obsession with living in the end of times, the recurring idea that "we are the last." Also in connection with these small anecdotes we have created a series of art works, one for each month, inspired by old methods of divination, like reading the intestines of an animal, or looking at the pattern of coffee grains. So when studying these images, the viewer is invited to make his/her own prognosis.

AD: Reading through it, one is very aware that humans have looked to the sky for omens, for signs of impending doom or change. Did you consider using any more stellar notions of divination or were you focused totally from the start on earthly objects?

MB: I haven't thought of that, but it's true, most of the "mancies" we have used are all very materialistic and we have left the ephemeral aside – the wind, the stars and the birds are all extremely useful as methods of divination, but difficult to work with as objects/images. The bird especially has a central position in the history of divination, perhaps because of its placement in the sky, transmitting messages between man and the divine. In ancient Rome one of the official priests was the Augur. He looked at the flight of birds to interpret the will of the Gods.

AD: You mention a technique of divination called molybdomancy in another interview and the fact that it is still used in Germany and Austria. Could you say a little bit more about that?

MB: Molybdomancy is carried out through pouring melted lead or tin into cold water. The metal instantly coagulates into weird cauliflower shaped sculptures that will trigger your imagination. And as you mention it's a ritual that is still practiced, also in Sweden and Finland, but especially during New Years Eve when the shiny piece of spiky metal is supposed to give you a hint on how the New Year is going to turn out. If you see a boat you are looking at long travels, a scythe signals there will be ties cut, a key might indicate a career move and so on. We are dreaming of making a huge public sculpture



using this method. Melting tons of tin and pour it into, let's say the Thames, then put it on a plinth on New Year's Eve and re-cast it every year.

AD: In your introductory text, you write of "the human need to discover patterns within the formless structure of nature." In a previous issue of Stimulus Respond we spoke to Chris Watson about this theme and his experience, from sound recording across the planet, that there is in fact a structure behind it all, but one that is far too complex for humans to comprehend. Are omens in fact glimpses of such a structure? Or, what we like to think of as glimpses?

MB: Unfortunately I am more of a believer that omens are signs of our amazing innate ability to confabulate in order to cope with the huge amounts of meaninglessness that surrounds us. What I mean with that is that our brain dislikes the seemingly meaningless and produces meaning even if there isn't any. We are great pattern readers and will see figures in clouds and hear music in a hail storm. And it seems like people inclined to be more right hemisphere oriented and thus more prone to unfiltered sensory input, have had central positions in the art of reading omens like religious persons, savants, oracles and artists. I would like to label it as creative misunderstandings, a type of Aeolian harp playing the axons and synapses that make the storm of impressions mutate into new ideas and visions.

But of course it is a bit depressing to not acknowledge the possibility that there is a complex structure behind it all. And if one likes to think so, tea leaves, molten lead and a boiled head of a donkey are great tools to study it with.

AD: As opposed to the artist's role as documenter, working with ideas of predictions, visions and signs has always been one of creativity's fundamental roles, the human ability to project, unlike other creatures. Do you see these as themes that span a few of your projects, such as *Temporary Truth*?

MB: Well many of our projects, like *Temporary Truth*, deal with the elusive truth concept of science where new findings and revolutionary theories are changing over time. Something that was believed to be absolutely true 70 years ago is now looked upon with great disbelief. Like lobotomy, which won a Nobel Prize in 1949 and

was the most celebrated method of treating psychosis in the late 1940's. By 1951 over 20,000 lobotomies had been performed in the USA. A small cut in the frontal lobe and voila, neurosis gone! But with that also the visions you're mentioning disappeared - the apparitions, the phantoms and the spectres. Today neuroscience is trying to tackle the question of creativity and how ideas actually occur, using more subtle instruments like the MRI. Maybe the spark of divine inspiration is just a vague epileptic seizure?

So sure, the human ability to project is a recurring theme and as artists we always try to dream up something completely new, something we've never seen before. It might sound utopian and I've often asked myself why this is, but maybe it's because new experiences generate stronger emotions, and strong emotions creates memories. And all that together amplifies the experience of being alive.

AD: You presented photographs and objects from *The Last Calendar as Meditations on divinations*. I am curious how did entering that space feel for the visitor and how did you arrange the objects and artifacts?

MB: I wish to think of the experience of entering the exhibition as coming into a laboratory where a set of tools is on display that triggers the imagination. I like the idea that the artworks are tools and that you are supposed to use them productively. An abstract painting is not only an abstract painting but also a map made of coffee for you to navigate in. The context of the artwork made the viewer look for useful information like signs or omens if you like. Your immediate future could be materialized as the sprouts of a petrified potato or a shimmering pool of oil on asphalt.

AD: You ended *The Last Calendar* with a guide to making your own *The end is nigh* banner. Was it ever used by anybody or were you more interested in triggering that image we all have of a lone figure proclaiming imminent doom?

MB: Yes it's been used, and not only by lunatics. The editors at Cabinet have proudly carried it during readings from the calendar both at the PS1 and Guggenheim. And I went around New York with one after a reading during the art fairs earlier this year. I was amazed how happy people looked when seeing someone presenting such a gloomy

message.

AD: And you have a really interesting list of mancies too you'd like to include here?

MB: Yes ...

*Aeromancy: divination by weather or by throwing sand into the wind*

*Ailurumancy: divination by the actions of a familiar cat*

*Alectryomancy: divination by roosters pecking grain*

*Aleuromancy: divination by flour or messages baked in cakes*

*Alphitomancy: divination by barley*

*Ambulomancy: divination by walking*

*Amniomancy: divination by the caul of a newborn infant*

*Anthracomancy: divination by watching a burning coal*

*Anthropomancy: divination from human entrails*

*Anthroposomancy: divination from facial or bodily characteristics*

*Arachnomancy: divination using spiders*

*Arithmomancy: divination by means of numbers*

*Armomancy: divination from the shoulders*

*Astragalomancy: divination by knuckle-bones or dice*

*Astromancy: divination using the stars, astrology*

*Austromancy: divination or soothsaying from words in the winds*

*Axinomancy: divination by heating or throwing an axe*

*Belomancy: divination by marked arrows*

*Bibliomancy: divination by random Bible passages (pagans preferred Homer or Virgil)*

*Bletonomancy: divination by ripples or patterns in moving water*

*Botanomancy: divination by plants*

*Capnomancy: divination by smoke, or bursting poppy heads*

*Cartomancy: divination by cards*

*Catoptromancy: divination by a polished shield or mirror*

*Causimomancy: divination from the ashes of burned leaves or paper*

*Cephalomancy: divination by a boiled donkey or human skull*

*Ceraunoscopy: divination by lightning and thunder*

*Ceromancy: divination by molten wax poured into water*

*Chaomancy: divination from the appearance of the air*

*Chartomancy: divination from written pieces of paper*

*Chiromancy: divination by the nails, lines, and fingers of the hand*

*Chresmomancy: divination from magic sounds or foreign words*

*Claiguscience: divination from the taste or smell of a food that is not present*

*Clednomancy: divination from hearing a chance word*

*Cleidomancy: divination by a suspended key*

*Cleromancy: divination by the casting of lots*

*Coscinomancy: divination by a sieve suspended on shears*

*Crithomancy: divination by grains sprinkled on burnt sacrifices*

*Cromniomancy: divination by onions*

*Crystallomancy: divination by crystal ball or the casting of gemstones*

*Cubomancy: divination by throwing dice*

*Cyclomancy: divination by the wheel of fortune*

*Dactyliomancy: divination by suspended finger ring or pendulum*

*Daphnomancy: divination by the crackle of roasting laurel leaves*

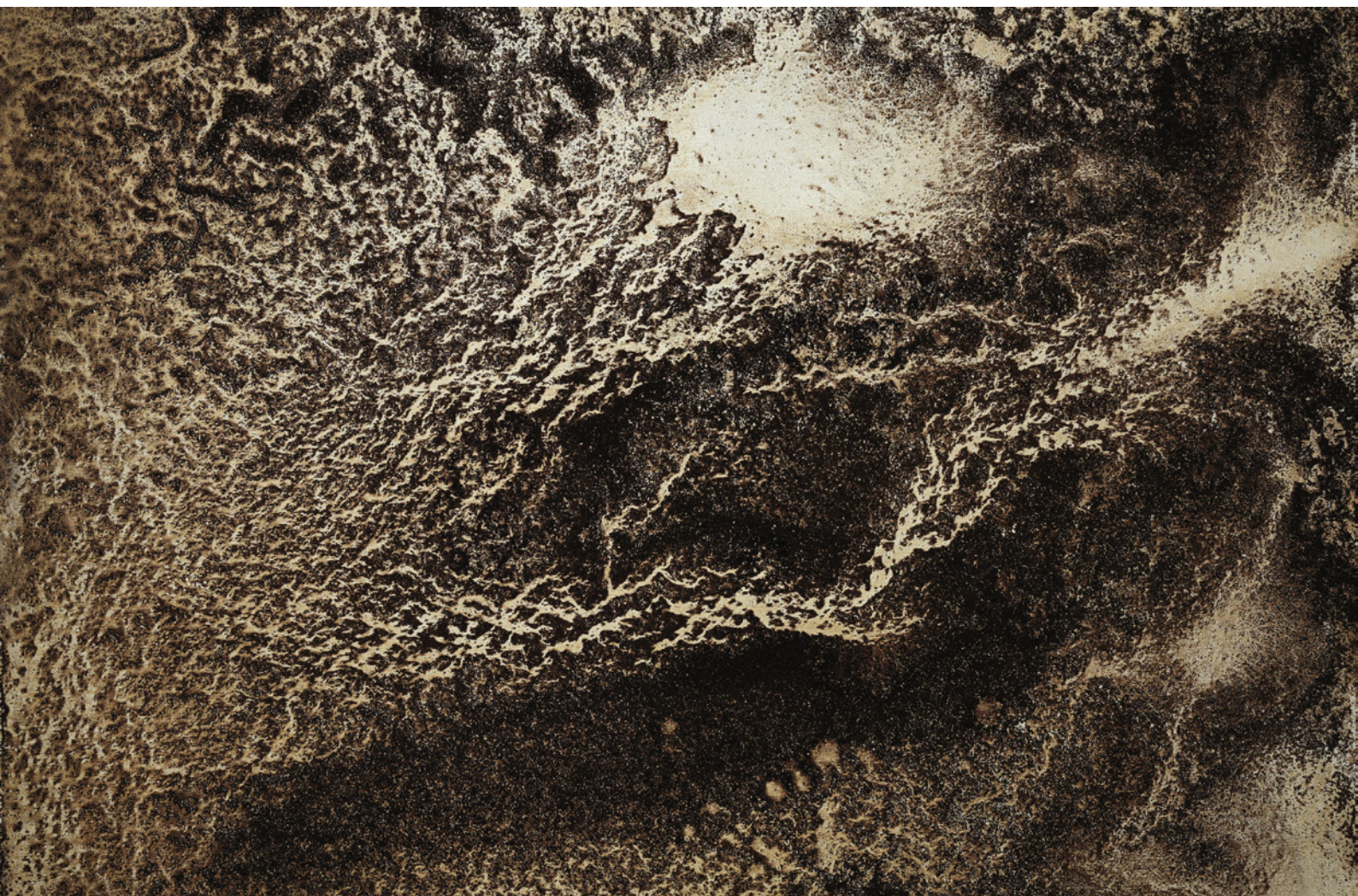
*Demonomancy: divination with the help of demons and spirits*

*Dendromancy: divination by oak and mistletoe*

*Elaeomancy: divination by the surface of water*

*Enoptomancy: divination with a mirror*









*Epombriamancy: divination from the sound of rain.*  
*Felidomancy: divination from the behavior of wild cats*  
*Gastromancy: divination by food, or sounds from the stomach*  
*Gelomancy: divination from laughter*  
*Geomancy: divination by cracks or lines in the earth, or dots on paper*  
*Glauximancy: divination using owl castings*  
*Graptomancy: divination from handwriting*  
*Gyromancy: divination by spinning in a circle until dizzy*  
*Haemocapnomancy: divination by the smoke of burning blood-soaked paper tissues*  
*Halomancy: divination with salt*  
*Hepatoscopy: divination by the liver of a sacrificed animal*  
*Hieromancy: divination by interpreting sacrifices*  
*Hippomancy: divination by the behavior of horses*  
*Hydromancy: divination by water or tides*  
*Ichthyomancy: divination from the movements or entrails of fish*  
*Idolomancy: divination from movie or rock stars*  
*Lampadomancy: divination by the flickering of torches*  
*Lecanomancy: divination by looking at oil or jewels in water*  
*Libanomancy: divination by staring at the smoke of burning incense*  
*Lithomancy: scrying with gemstones and natural crystals*  
*Logarithmancy: divination by logarithms*  
*Lychnomancy: divination by flame of an oil lamp or candle*  
*Macharomancy: divination by knives or swords*  
*Maculomancy: divination from the shape and placement of birthmarks*  
*Margaritomancy: divination by heating and roasting pearls*  
*Mediamancy: divination by scanning police radio or random TV shows*  
*Meteoromancy: divination by storms and comets*  
*Metopomancy: divination by examining the face and forehead*  
*Molybdomancy: divination by dropping molten lead into water*  
*Myomancy: divination by squeaks of mice*  
*Necromancy: divination by ghosts or spirits of the dead*  
*Nephelomancy: divination by appearance of clouds*  
*Nigromancy: divination by walking around the graves of the dead*  
*Oculomancy: divination by observing the eye*  
*Oinomancy: divination by gazing into a glass of wine*  
*Ololygmancy: divination by the howling of dogs or wolves*  
*Omphalomancy: divination by counting knots on the umbilical cord*  
*Oneiromancy: divination by the interpretation of dreams*  
*Onimancy: divination using olive oil to let objects slip through the fingers*  
*Onomatomancy: divination by the letters in names*  
*Onychomancy: divination by polished fingernails*  
*Oomancy: divination from drops of fresh egg whites in water*  
*Ophiomancy: divination by the coiling and movement of serpents*  
*Ornithomancy: divination by the flight or songs of birds*  
*Osteomancy: divination from bones*  
*Ouleimancy: divination by the appearance of scars.*  
*Pegomancy: divination by bubbles in springs or fountains*  
*Pessomancy: divination by pebbles*  
*Philematomancy: divination by kissing*  
*Phyllomancy: divination by the patterns and colors of leaves*  
*Phyllorhodomancy: divination by clapping rose petals between the hands*  
*Physiognomy: divination by shape, marks, and proportions of the body*  
*Plastromancy: divination by tortoise shells*  
*Podomancy: divination by the soles of the feet*



*Psephomancy: divination by rolling small stones, or selecting them at random*  
*Pseudomancy: fraudulent fortune-telling*  
*Psychomancy: divination from the state of the soul, alive or dead*  
*Pyromancy: divination by fire or flames*  
*Retromancy: divination by looking over one's shoulder*  
*Rhabdomancy: divination by branches or rods, dowsing*  
*Rhapsodomancy: divination by a book of poetry*  
*Scapulimancy: divination from cracks in a charred shoulder blade*  
*Scatomancy: divination by studying feces*  
*Sciomancy: divination from shadows or the shades of the dead*  
*Scyphomancy: divination by cups or vases*  
*Selenomancy: divination from the phases or appearance of the moon*  
*Selenosciamancy: divination by the shadows of moonlight through trees*  
*Sideromancy: divination by the burning of straws*  
*Spasmatomancy: divination by twitchings of a body*  
*Spatilomancy: divination by animal droppings*  
*Sphondylomancy: divination from beetles or other insects*  
*Spodomancy: divination by ashes*  
*Stichomancy: divination from random passages in books*  
*Stigonomancy: divination by writing on tree bark*  
*Stolisomancy: divination by the act of dressing*  
*Suggraphamancy: divination by studying history*  
*Sternomancy: divination by the breast-bones*  
*Sycomancy: divination by drying fig leaves*  
*Tasseography: divination by tea leaves*  
*Tephramancy: divination by the ashes on an altar*  
*Theomancy: divination from the responses of oracles*  
*Theriomancy: divination by watching wild animals*  
*Tiromancy: divination by milk curds, or the holes on cheese*  
*Topomancy: divination by the contours of the land*  
*Trochomancy: divination by wheel tracks*  
*Thumomancy: divination by intense introspection of one's own soul*  
*Transatuaumancy: divination from chance remarks overheard in a crowd*  
*Tympanimancy: divination from the rhythms of drums*  
*Urimancy: divination by casting the Urim and Thummin*  
*Urinomancy: divination using urine for scrying*  
*Xenomancy: divination by studying the first stranger to appear*  
*Xylomancy: divination by wood or fallen branches.*  
*Zygomancy: divination with weights*  
*Zoomancy: divination by the behavior of animals*

For further details, see <http://www.bigertbergstrom.com> and <http://alandunn67.co.uk/stimulusaudio.html>.